DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 318 EC 306 403

AUTHOR Ensign, Jacque
TITLE Defying the Stereotypes of Special Education: Homeschool Students.
PUB DATE 1998-04-15
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 14, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Home Schooling; *Individualized Instruction; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Learning Disabilities; Longitudinal Studies; Nontraditional Education; Outcomes of Education; Parent Attitudes; Parent Student Relationship; Parents as Teachers; Special Education; Student Development; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies patterns in the academic and social development of six homeschooled students (with learning disabilities or giftedness) based on a seven-year longitudinal study of 100 home-schooled students. It contrasts findings on the effectiveness of home schooling with accepted expectations for special education students in the formal education system. The paper also examines parents' educational backgrounds and pedagogical approaches. For the four students with learning disabilities, the study finds that one has graduated and the others are likely to graduate and will probably continue with postsecondary education. These students became good (though late) readers and have good self-esteem. Analysis of the educational environments of the three gifted students studied (including one who was also categorized as learning disabled) found that parents focused on following the students' interests and providing a stimulating academic and social environment. For both gifted and learning disabled students, the study finds that the educational philosophies and pedagogies employed emphasize: (1) a focus on the whole child rather than primarily on the child's disability or extreme ability; (2) individualized attention; and (3) care, patience and respect for the child that leads the teaching in both the timing and content of instruction. (Contains 22 references.) (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
ENSIGN
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Defying the Stereotypes of Special Education: Homeschool Students

Jacque Ensign
Southern Connecticut State University
New Haven, CT 06515 ensign@scsu.ctstateu.edu
American Educational Research Association
15 April 1998
San Diego, California

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 419 318

In the past decade, homeschooling has been featured regularly in the press and news media, in forums as diverse as the Wall Street Journal (Stecklow 1994), National Public Radio (NPR 1995), the NBC Today Show (NBC 1988), The Chronicle of Higher Education (Tarricone 1997), The New York Times Magazine (Roorbach 1997), and academic presses (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow 1995; Van Galen & Pitman 1991). With an estimated 500,000 to 1,200,000 children homeschooled today (Ensign 1997; Lines 1996; Ray 1996; Stecklow 1994), and an annual growth rate of at least 15%, homeschooling is affecting a sizable number of students.

Research in the 1970s and 1980s frequently focused on whether homeschooled children who were taught by parents who were untrained as teachers could do as well academically as public school students. Now, in the late 1990s, special education students are increasingly joining the ranks of those who are homeschooled and the initial question is being raised again, this time about teaching special education students at home. There has been widespread concern that parents who are not trained in special education cannot adequately teach children with special needs.

Historically, expectations for student performance and school outcomes in special education have been based on research in which all the subjects attended some version of what Tyack calls the "one best system" (1974). As we begin to recognize more plurality in both private and public education, researchers can no longer assume that students are taught the same way. Researchers need to look closely at student outcomes in non-traditional settings to expand understandings of academic and social skills development. By teaching outside the norms of teacher preparation and pedagogy, homeschoolers are offering researchers many opportunities to observe this educational alternative's effects on students (Holt 1983).

Researchers who have personal experience teaching in both homeschool and traditional school settings have what Robert Donmeyer characterizes as different life experiences from those researchers who only know mainstream school settings (Donmeyer 1997). Also, an ongoing debate within AERA has focused on whether research must be based on standardized or contextualized outcome measures. While the most cited research on home education has been based on standardized measures, other research has been based on contextualized measures such as Carol Edelsky (1990) has advocated for whole language research. This paper, in an effort to contribute to the research community's critique of educational outcomes, represents a contextualized outcome approach to research by a researcher who has extensive experience in both traditional and homeschool teaching.

After ten years teaching in traditional schools, I homeschooled my three children for eleven years. Since 1990, I have evaluated the academic progress of over a hundred homeschooled students annually. Since many of these students have continued to homeschool, I have amassed a wealth of data on these students. Now that I am teaching in a teacher education program to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms, I find that the textbook descriptions of educating special education students are often at odds with what I have observed in many homeschool settings.

EC 306 403

This paper questions accepted expectations for special education students that are found in current introductory textbooks for teacher education. By looking outside traditional systems, this researcher has found exceptions to many of the textbook patterns for academic and social development. My work with special education homeschooled students has included students who are in most of the categories that special education programs serve. Although I have worked with homeschooled students with autism, communication disorders, mental retardation, emotional and behavioral disorders, ADD, ADHD, and physical disabilities, only the categories of learning disabilities and giftedness have had enough students in them for a number of years for me to feel confident that I am seeing some general trends. Therefore, in this paper, I will only focus on the categories of learning disabilities and giftedness. This paper will highlight cases from a seven year longitudinal study of one hundred homeschool students who represent regular and special education categories. The paper chronicles the academic and social development of six special education students who have been identified as exhibiting learning disabilities and/or giftedness and examines their parents' educational backgrounds and pedagogical approaches.

Learning Disabilities

From a textbook on special education, the following is a typical excerpt describing studies of outcomes of students with learning disabilities: "Educational experiences are frustrating for youth who have learning disabilities. Their drop-out rate is high (38 percent versus 25 percent for nondisabled youth). Only 28 percent attempt postsecondary education (versus 56 percent for nondisabled youth), and most do not have the study skills, reading and math skills, or academic coping skills to successfully persevere through a 4-year college career." (Peraino 1992 in Turnbull and others 1995, 22)

Although only one of the homeschooled students with learning disabilities described in this present study is old enough to have graduated from high school, projecting from the data so far on their study skills, reading and math skills, and academic coping skills, I expect all of these students to graduate and many to continue with postsecondary education. Why is there such a stark difference in expected outcomes for traditionally schooled versus these homeschooled students with learning disabilities? A look at the homeschoolers' pedagogy and underlying assumptions about these special education students suggests some possible reasons.

The educational background of the parents homeschooling these students ranges from two years of community college to a masters degree. Most do not have degrees in teaching and none have had courses in special education. When asked how these parents learn how to teach these learning disabled students, most replied that they use a combination of books, homeschool magazines, talking with other homeschoolers, and watching their own child with learning disabilities to see what works and what does not. One parent also uses on-line bulletin boards. None use traditional forms of inservice training, workshops, or courses.

When asked what specialized attention the LD student gets from the primary homeschool teacher, all responded first by describing one-on-one teaching with much encouragement and love. All have read extensively to the child, even after the child mastered reading. Many of the students were taught phonics but most never mastered phonics, being more global readers instead. Most have tried many approaches to spelling, with minimal success. All parents interviewed continuously work on organizational skills with the child.

When asked what specialized attention the LD students get from specialists, all use an educational consultant for helping plan and annually monitor the academic progress of the student. Many have used specialists for testing for LD and reading. One student is getting specialized LD tutoring twice a week, year round. All the others get no specialized help from specialists on a regular basis throughout the academic year.

Since many schools rely on classmates and peers to provide some of the academic assistance to mainstreamed LD students, I asked these parents what specialized attention the LD students get from classmates and peers. In homeschools, generally the classmates are siblings who are not peers. Parents noted that siblings who are quicker in academics sometimes assist the LD student. They noted that siblings sometimes provide motivation but also the ease with which the siblings do academics is occasionally discouraging for the LD student who struggles with academics. All noted that they give careful counseling to the siblings to not make fun of the LD child and that generally this is successful. A few of the students were in traditional classrooms prior to being homeschooled and parents noted that the LD students had more behavior and motivation problems in the traditional than in the homeschool situations. With peers, homeschoolers appear to face similar problems to those faced by traditionally schooled students. They learn ways to hide their disability in Scouts, clubs, and with friends. Often, their fear of being noticed drives them to practice at home so that when they are with their peers, they know the texts or can sign their names in cursive.

When asked about their philosophy toward the learning disability of their student, parents responded noticeably differently than I have heard from teachers in traditional schools. I asked whether they considered the learning disability to be an excuse, an inconvenience, a bother, part of the package, a challenge, or "what." Several responded by noting that the learning disability is a big challenge but it is also a part of the strengths of the child, such as being very creative or having the ability to see through chaos. For instance, a child who is intuitively (rather than rationally) able to see through chaos in a cluttered room will approach reading in the same intuitive way. Another parent in saying, "it was just a timing issue. I knew he'd eventually read - and he did at age 14," reflected the attitude of many of these parents that LD children follow a different timetable in academic development but that they would develop if they were given time and support. (Note how similar this is to the stance that Louise Spear-Swerling and Robert Sternberg have taken in their 1996 book, *Off Track*.) Behind these strongly held philosophies, all admitted to underlying concerns that these children might not succeed, since they knew many cases of traditionally schooled students who do not succeed. Overall, parents saw the child as normal rather than abnormal.

When asked about their pedagogical approaches for these students with learning disabilities, parents noted that they went at the speed of the child, expecting the child to blossom when ready. All noted that they were constantly having to find ways to help the child accommodate to the learning disability. They worked on problem areas but also encouraged acceleration in areas of strengths, be it flying private airplanes, doing electronics, or puppetry. Parents hoped that when the child moved on to other schooling, that the colleges or schools would also see beyond the learning disability and allow the student to shine in the areas of abilities. One parent of a gifted student with learning disabilities expected overall excellence while realizing that some accommodations had to be made for the learning disability. The overall approach of these parents was to work around the learning disabilities while expecting overall learning to continually progress.

Briefly, here is a synopsis of four cases of students with learning disabilities in this study.

I have followed Eileen since she was in first grade. She is now a ninth grader. For the first six years, she struggled to read and to do any academics. Having finally mastered reading and basic academic skills, she is now taking some high school courses. Her mother said recently, "You can tell when they are ready for a change. She's finally able to blossom and the motivation is there. So much of her energy has been on learning. After so long a wait, we'll take it at her speed." They are guardedly optimistic that she will continue her education at a technical or community college after she finishes high school.

I have followed Jamie for the last six years. At 12, he is still struggling to read. For the last year and a half, he has been in individual LD therapy twice a week for an hour and a half each time. Recently, noting that reading is still not progressing very easily, his family has begun to focus on how his LD is part of his personality, in that he learns by doing, not by symbols or being told. They have decided to capitalize on his interests in flying and are now allowing him to be in the cockpit with his father in their private plane, making frequent flights to other states for his father's work. Realizing how touch is involved in his learning, they have included touch in reading, with his mother giving him neck massages while he reads. They are amazed how much better he reads during these massages. Because he loves animals and tends to be reticent in social situations, he is now training a dog so that he can take it into retirement homes for "touch therapy" for the seniors and to help him develop more social skills.

I have followed Daniel since 3rd grade. He is now in 10th grade. He was labeled LD at age 9 while in school. The family tried specialized help for LD when he was in public school but noted that his self-confidence was rapidly eroding and behavior problems were growing. In homeschooling, they tried a number of approaches to reading, including Orton- Gilligan and several phonics programs but none worked. Because he was classified as LD, he was able to get
books on audio tapes through the Library of Congress program for the blind. During the years that he devoured books on tapes, his family called him a "tape-worm." He did not read until he was 14, when he finally began reading Frog and Toad books. Three months later, he was reading Hardy Boys books and in two more months he was reading adult books. Now, one year later, he reads faster than his sister who has been avidly reading chapter books for seven years. He is presently immersed in reading J.R.R. Tolkein's books and his family lovingly refers to him as a "book worm." Because he still finds math and writing difficult, his family is focusing on those skills while trusting that, in time, they will develop, just as the reading finally did.

Tristian is the oldest of the LD students whom I have followed. I worked with him during his eleven years of homeschool and have continued to follow his progress in the five years after homeschool. At six, he was tested for LD, and at 8 he was tested for reading since he was still not reading beyond a preprimer level. He began reading independently at nine and a half and by 11 was reading college texts, though he still could not read isolated words. Also being gifted, he wrote reams on the computer where he could use a spell checker to make his writing understood. He did advanced coursework throughout most of his schooling but struggled with foreign language, spelling, and memorizing math facts. At 14, he became proficient in electronics and several years later went into computer repair to earn money. At 16, he went to an elite high school where they noticed his learning disabilities but also noticed that somehow he read and comprehended more books than any other student in his class. After high school, he spent half a year in Ecuador learning Spanish and the culture there by immersion, rather than in a school. A year later, while a freshman in college, he conducted a month-long anthropology research project in the back country of the Dominican Republic. He did all the research, in books

and in interviews, in Spanish. A sophomore, he is now on the dean's list at Macalester College and a teaching assistant for an introductory anthropology class. He is known for his independence, his ability to ferret out information in unusual places, and his horrible spelling. This summer he will be doing two months of anthropological work on a grant in Bolivia, recording a CD about the Peace Corps there. All of his anthropological research has been planned and executed by him, including securing grants and writing and presenting final reports.

Overall, these homeschooled students with learning disabilities are expected to be and are treated as normal. They are often not as aware of their disabilities as traditionally schooled students since they are not labeled as disabled by their families. Even those who read very late catch up quickly and some become excellent readers. All love literature. Usually, these students have good self-esteem as they have areas of expertise and are respected for what they do, rather than known for what they do not do well.

GIFTED

Increasingly, in today's schools with tightening budgets, gifted students are not receiving the specialized education that is recommended by authorities in gifted education. Many gifted students find themselves relegated to easy, repetitive academics in mainstreamed classes. As Hallahan and Kauffman note, underachievement for gifted students is frequently caused by "inappropriate school programs - schoolwork that is unchallenging and boring because gifted students have already mastered most of the material or because teachers have low expectations or mark students down for their misbehavior (Kolb & Jussim, 1994). A related problem is that gifted underachievers often develop negative self-images and negative attitudes toward school (Delisle, 1982; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994)." (Hallahan & Kauffman 1997, 472)

In the cases of homeschooled gifted students, parents are consciously trying to stimulate and encourage their gifted students to prevent boredom and underachievement. What is notable is the way in which they are teaching these gifted students; the students themselves are not aware that they are any more exceptional than other students since all the students are treated as unique. Their high level of achievement and self-confidence is evident, as is the length to which these parents go to expand these students' horizons.

The educational backgrounds of the parents homeschooling the gifted students in the cases in this paper range from a high school education to a masters degree. Of those who have degrees in teaching, one has a degree in teaching mentally retarded elementary students and one has an early childhood degree. Like the parents of LD students, these parents use a combination of observing the child and consulting relevant literature and/or people to learn how to teach these gifted students.

When asked what specialized attention the gifted student gets from the primary homeschool teacher, all responded first by describing a lot of independent time for the student. Time actually spent with the teacher is mostly in long discussions with the student, with the rest of the time going to overseeing school assignments.

When asked what specialized attention the LD student gets from specialists, all use a combination of mentors and special-interest classes or activities such as Space Camp, art classes, science museum classes, and summer programs for the gifted. Adults who share common interests with the student are often key mentors for these students. This is usually on an informal basis, with the student having long conversations with a neighbor or family friend who is knowledgeable and willing to talk or work with the student. Informality

seems to be a critical aspect of these relationships as the students do not want to be "taught" so much as to be treated as co-explorers.

Interestingly, contrary to the stereotypical concern that gifted students may have difficulty with peers, these gifted students are very social with a wide variety of peers and classmates. Neighbors, classmates in special courses, and siblings are all part of their lives. Typically, the gifted students are in a leadership role when they are with their peers and classmates.

When asked about their philosophy toward the giftedness of their students, parents responded by saying the giftedness is a challenge, a precious gift, a joy, and a responsibility.

When asked about their pedagogical approaches for these gifted students, parents noted that they basically follow the students' interests, supplementing and expanding their horizons as much as possible. They try to provide a stimulating environment in which the student can pursue interests and find new interests. They feel that attention to academic and social skills that the student needs to develop is important in providing a well-rounded education for these students.

Following are the synopses of three cases of homeschooled gifted students in this study.

Tristian's summary was the last one in the section on learning disabilities.

Philip is now 12 years old. I have followed him since he was five. As a kindergartner, he was an avid inventor, more interested in the theory and process of his inventions than in their ultimate success. Reading has always been a love of Philip's. He rapidly learned to read in kindergarten and since then has always read quantities of high-quality books each year. A natural leader, he was organizing group displays of collections in first grade and by seventh grade was foreman for a one thousand dollar mapping and inventory project of a junkyard to help it comply with EPA Standards. Although his mother is the daily teacher, his father is instrumental in making sure that his children have as broad an experience with the world as they can get. His father is constantly finding new experiences for Philip, such as a recent course in HTML programming and an on-line writing class.

Audin is a nine year old whom I have followed since he was in kindergarten. As a child of parents with high school educations, one of whom is Black, his grandparents were initially very concerned that this gifted child of color was being cheated to be taught at home. Now that Audin is nine, they are no longer concerned as they see how much he is learning at home. When he was in kindergarten, he had his own gem jewelry business and amazed customers at craft fairs when he mentally totaled sales and gave accurate change for transactions. He is presently reading Stephen Hawking's books on theoretical physics and spending a lot of time discussing those concepts with a neighbor who is an engineer. Neighborhood peers come over to his house after they get home from school so that they can play chess, math games, and talk about science. He is a child who absorbs information and who finds formal classes frustrating. His two parents are eager explorers of new territory with him and continually find new people, books, and experiences for him.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, these students with learning disabilities and giftedness have not been taught with the same assumptions and techniques used by special educators. The hallmarks of the educational philosophies and pedagogies of the homeschoolers in this study are 1) focus on the whole child rather than primarily on the child's disability or extreme ability, 2)

individualized attention, and 3) care, patience, and respect for the child to lead the teacher in both the timing and the content of what the child is ready to be taught. These students with learning disabilities and giftedness have not followed the expected patterns for students with their classifications. The educational outcomes for these homeschooled special education students are self-confident students who have developed academic skills at very uneven rates but who have usually achieved academic excellence by the end of high school.

Deborah Meier, in a recent article emphasizes why "oddball" schools which are successful should be noticed. "Rather than ignore such schools because their solutions lie in unreplicable individuals or circumstances, it's precisely such unreplicability that should be celebrated. Maybe what these 'special' schools demonstrate is that every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus to surround all young people with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways." (Meier 1998, 359) The homeschooling of the special education students in this present study can be viewed as an "oddball" schooling that works because of caring, powerful adults and children who have not lost faith in quality education and achievement. These homeschool cases raise serious questions about the stereotypes which influence current practices in special education.

REFERENCES

Donmeyer, Robert. "Editorial: Research as Advocacy and Storytelling." Educational Researcher. 26(5), (1997): 2.

Edelsky, Carol. "Whose Agenda Is This Anyway? A Response to McKenna, Robinson, and Miller." Educational Researcher. 19(8), (1990): 7-10.

Ensign, Jacque. Homeschooling Gifted Students: An Introductory Guide for Parents. ERIC Digest No. E543, December 1997.

Hallahan, Daniel & James Kauffman. Exceptional Learners: Introduction to Special Education. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997.

Holt, John Caldwell. "Schools and Home Schoolers: A Fruitful Partnership. Phi Delta Kappan, 64 (1983): 391-394.

Lines, Patricia M. "Home Schooling Comes of Age." Educational Leadership, 54(2), (October 1996): 63-67.

Mayberry, Maralee, Knowles, J. Gary, Ray, Brian D., & Marlow, Stacey. Home Schooling: Parents as Educators. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, 1995.

Meier, Deborah. "Can the Odds Be Changed?" Phi Delta Kappan. 79 (5), (January 1998): 358+.

National Broadcasting Company (NBC) (Producer). "The Today Show," interview on home schooling. 29 August 1988.

National Public Radio (NPR) (Producer). "Talk of the Nation," Hour Two: home schooling. 30 March 1995.

Peraino, J. M. "Post21 Follow-up Studies: How Do Special Education Graduates Fare?" In P. Wehman, ed. Life Beyond the Classroom: Transition Strategies for Young People with Disabilities. Baltimore, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1992.

Ray, Brian D. Home education research fact sheet IIb. National Home Education Research Institute, PO Box 13939, Salem OR 97309, 1996.

Ray, Brian D. Strengths of Their Own—Home Schoolers Across America: Academic Achievement, Family Characteristics, and Longitudinal Traits. Salem, OR: NHERI Publications, 1997.

Roorbach, Bill. "Mommy, What's a Classroom?" The New York Times Magazine. 2 February 1997. 30-37.

Spear-Swerling, Louise & Robert Sternberg. Off Track: When Poor Readers Become "Learning Disabled." Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.
Stecklow, Steve. "Fed up with Schools, More Parents Turn to Teaching Them at Home." The Wall Street Journal, 130(91), 10 May 1994. A1, A12.
Terricone, Celeste. "States Consider How Colleges Treat Home-Schooled Students." The Chronicle of Higher Education. 1 August 1997. A 30.
Turnbull, Ann, Rutherford Turnbull III, Marilyn Shank, and Dorothy Leal. Exceptional Lives: Special Education in Today's Schools. Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1995.
Tyack, David. The One Best System. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.
Van Galen, Jane A. & Mary Anne Pitman (eds.). Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1991.
Vaughn, Sharon, Candace Bos & Jeanne Shay Schumm. Teaching Mainstreamed, Diverse, and At-Risk Students in the General Education Classroom. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.
Wood, Judy & Andrea Lazzari. Exceeding the Boundaries: Understanding Exceptional Lives. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997.